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Drift and Unlimited Semiosis

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## Drift and Unlimited Semiosis

**UMBERTO ECO**

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## UMBERTO ECO

### "Drift and Unlimited Semiosis"<sup>1</sup>

The double metaphor of the world as a text and of a text as a world has been a venerable history. To interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of the text by producing other texts. Explaining the way the solar system works by resorting to Newton's laws, or uttering a series of sentences in order to say that a given text means so and so—these are, at least in Peirce's sense, both forms of interpretations. The problem is not to challenge the old idea that the world is a text which can be interpreted, but rather to decide whether it has a fixed meaning, many possible meanings, or none at all.

Let me start with two quotations:

1. "What does the fish remind you of?"

"Other fish."

"And what do other fish remind you of?"

"Other fish."

(Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1961, p.290)

2. Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?

Polonius: By th' mass, and 'tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is back'd like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale?

Polonius: Very like a whale.

(*Hamlet*, iii, 2)

The opposition between these quotations reminds us that all along in the course of history we are confronted with two ideas of interpretation. On one side it is assumed that to interpret a text means to find out the meaning intended by its original author or - in any case - its objective nature or essence, an essence which, as such, is independent of our interpretation. On the other side it is assumed that texts can be interpreted in infinite ways.

Taken as such these two options are both instances of epistemological fanaticism. The first option is instantiated by various kinds of fundamentalism and various forms of metaphysical realism, by which knowledge is

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture given in Bloomington for the Indiana University Institute for Advanced Study on July 19, 1989. A longer version of this lecture will be published in "Limits of Interpretation," Indiana University Press, forthcoming.



*adeaquatio rei et intellectus*. The most outrageous example of the alternative option is certainly the one that in my previous studies I have called *hermetic semiosis*.

## The Hermetic Drift

I so call the interpretative habit which dominated Renaissance Hermeticism and which is based upon the principles of universal analogy and sympathy, according to which every item of the furniture of the world is linked to every (or to many) other elements of the superior world by means of similitudes or resemblances. It is through similitudes that the otherwise occult parenthood between things is manifested and every sublunar body bears the traces of that parenthood impressed upon it as a *signature*.

The basic principle is not only that the similar can be known through the similar but that from similarity to similarity everything can be connected with everything else so that everything can be in turn either the expression or the content of any other thing.

Since "any two things resemble one another just as strongly as any two others, if recondite resemblances are admitted" (Peirce, 1934: 2.634),<sup>2</sup> if the Renaissance Magus wanted to find an occult parenthood between the various items of the furniture of the world, he had to assume a very flexible notion of resemblance.

To show examples of flexible criteria of resemblance let me quote not the most radical occult and hermetic semiotic technique, but rather some instances of a very reasonable semiotic technique, the one recommended by the authors of the arts of memory. Those authors were neither cabbalist nor sorcerers summoning spirits. They simply wanted to build up systems for remembering a series of ideas, objects or names through another series of names, objects or images of objects. In order to do so, they used to set up complex constructions of *loci*, that is, of real architectural, sculptural and pictorial structures, so as to provide a systematic expression plane for the contents to be memorized, signified and recollected. But these mnemotechnic machines were something more than a practical device for remembering notions: it is not by chance or for decorative purposes that the systems of *loci* assume frequently the form of a Theater of the World or emulate cosmological models. They aim at representing an organic *imago mundi*, an image of a world which is the result of a divine textual strategy. Thus, to be semiotically

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Charles S. Peirce refer to *Collected Papers*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1943.



efficient, they reproduce the presumed tangle of signatures on which the Universe as a significant Whole is based. As Ramus (1581) had remarked, memory is the shadow of order, of *dispositio*, and order is the syntax of the universe.

In this sense these *artes* tell us something about various socially and culturally established semiotic rules.

The most systematic of these works is perhaps Cosma Rosselli's *Thesaurus Artificiosae Memoriae* (1579). Rosselli lists the following correlations:

- by a sample: a quantity of iron in order to recall iron;
- by similarity, which in turn is subdivided into similarity of substance (the human being as the microcosmic image of the macrocosm) and of quantity (ten fingers for the ten commandments);
- by metonymy and antonomasia: Atlas for the astronomers or for astronomy, a bear for the angry man, the lion for pride, Cicero for rhetoric;
- by homonymy: the animal dog for the dog star;
- by irony and contrast: the fool for the wise man;
- by vestigial traces: the track for the wolf, the mirror, in which Titus admired himself, for Titus;
- by a word of different pronunciation: *sanguine* for *sane*;
- by similarity of names: Arista for Aristotle,
- by genus and species: the leopard for the animal;
- by pagan symbol: the eagle for Jove;
- by peoples: the Parthians for arrows, the Phoenicians for the alphabet;
- by zodiacal sign: the sign for the constellation;
- by relation between an organ and its function: leg for walking;
- by common attribute: the crow for Ethiopia;
- by hieroglyphic: the ant for prudence;
- and finally, by totally idiosyncratic associations like: any monster of any sort for anything to be remembered.

The main feature of the hermetic drift seems to be the uncontrolled ability to shift from meaning to meaning, from similarity to similarity, from a connection to another. One is reminded of that game that consists in shifting from one term (let us say *peg*) to another (let us say *Plato*) in no more than six steps. If the game allows for every possible connection (be it metaphorical, metonymical, phonetic or else) one can always win. Let us try: "Peg - pig - bristles - bristle - brush - Mannerism - Idea - Plato."

Contrary to contemporary theories of drift, hermetic semiosis does not assert the absence of any univocal universal and transcendental meaning. It assumes that everything can send back to everything else - provided we can isolate the right rhetorical connection - because there is a strong transcendent subject, the neoplatonic One who (or Which), being the principle of the



universal contradiction, the place of the *Coincidentia Oppositorum*, and standing outside of every possible determination, being thus All and None and the Unspeakable Source of Everything at the same moment, permits everything to connect with everything else by a labyrinthine web of mutual referrals. It seems thus that hermetic semiosis identifies in every text, as well as in the Great Text of the World, the Fullness of Meaning, not its absence.

Nevertheless this world perfused with signatures, ruled, as it pretends, by the principle of universal significance, results in producing a perennial shift and deferral of any possible meaning. The meaning of a given word or of a given thing being another word or another thing, everything that has been said is in fact nothing else but an ambiguous allusion to something else.

In this sense the phantasmic content of every expression is a secret, or an enigma that sends us back to a further enigma. The meaning of every symbol being another symbol, more mysterious than the previous one, the consequence is twofold: (i) there is no way to test the reliability of an interpretation and (ii) the final content of every expression is a secret.

Since the process foresees the unlimited shifting from symbol to symbol, the meaning of a text is always postponed. The only meaning of a text is "I mean more." But since that "more" will be interpreted by a further "I mean more," the final meaning of a text is an empty secret. >

Thus hermetic semiosis transforms the whole world into a mere linguistic phenomenon but deprives language of any communicative power.

### **Hermetic Drift and Unlimited Semiosis**

The very idea of such a continuous shifting from meaning to meaning can evoke (at least for those who are hermetically eager to play with analogies) the Peircean idea of unlimited semiosis. At first glance certain quotations from Peirce seem to support the principle of an infinite interpretative drift. For instance: "The meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation. In fact it is nothing but the representation itself conceived as stripped of irrelevant clothing. But his clothing never can be completely stripped off: it is only changed for something more diaphanous. So there is an infinite regression here. Finally the interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along; and as representation, it has its interpretant again. Lo, another infinite series" (1934, 1.339).

Can we really speak of unlimited semiosis apropos of the hermetic ability to shift from term to term, or from thing to thing? Can we speak of unlimited semiosis when we recognize the same technique implemented by contemporary readers who wander through texts in order to find in them

secret puns, unheard-of etymologies, unconscious links, dances of 'Slipping Beauties,' ambiguous images that the clever reader can guess through the transparencies of the verbal texture even when no public agreement could support such an adventurous misreading?

There is a fundamental principle in Peirce's semiotics: "A sign is something by knowing which we know something more" (8.332). On the contrary the norm of hermetic semiosis seems to be: "a sign is something by knowing which we know something *else*."

To know more (in Peirce's sense) means that, from interpretant to interpretant, the sign is more and more determined both in its breadth and in its depth. In the course of unlimited semiosis the interpretation approximates, even though asymptotically, the final logical interpretant and at a certain stage of the process of interpretation we know more about the content of the representamen which started the interpretative chain. To know more does not mean to know everything, but it means that a sign entails all its remote illative consequences and the meaning of a proposition embraces "every obvious necessary deduction" (1934: 5.165).

We can know more of a sign because we accept to know its object according to a certain *ground*, that is under a certain description, from the point of view of a given context, "in some respect or capacity" (2.228). In structuralistic terms one could say that for Peirce semiosis is potentially unlimited from the point of view of the system, but it is not unlimited from the point of view of the process. In the course of a semiotic process we want to know only what is relevant according to a given *universe of discourse*.

Let me take an example of hermetic semiosis defeated by a thinker who acted as Peirce would have acted.

One of the most celebrated hermetic arguments was: the plant orchid has the same form as the human male testicles, therefore not only orchid stands for testicles but every operation accomplished on the plant can obtain a result on the human body. The hermetic argument went still further: not only did it establish a resemblance relation between the plant and the testicles but between both and other elements of the furniture of the macro- and microcosm, so that, by means of different rhetorical relationships (such as similarity, past or present contiguity, and so on) every one of these elements could stand for and act upon every other.

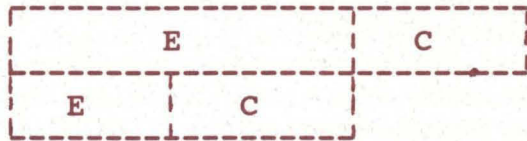
The objection raised by Francis Bacon (*Parasceve ad Historiam Naturalem et Experimentalem*, 1620) was the following: one must distinguish between a relationship of causality and a relationship of similarity. The roots of orchid are morphologically similar to male testicles, but the reason for which they have the same form is different. Being genetically different, the roots of the



orchid are also functionally different from male testicles. Therefore these two phenomena can be interpreted as morphologically analogous, but their analogy stops within the universe of discourse of morphology and cannot be extended into other universes of discourse.

Peirce would have added that, if the interpretation of the roots of orchid as testicles does not produce a practical habit allowing the interpreters to successfully operate according to that interpretation, the process of semiosis would have failed. In the same sense, one is entitled to try the most daring abductions, but if an abduction is not legitimated by further practical tests, the hypothesis cannot be entertained any longer.

The hermetic drift could be defined as an instance of connotative neoplasm. I would not like to discuss at this moment whether connotation is a systematic phenomenon or a contextual effect. In both cases, however, the phenomenon of connotation can still be represented by the diagram suggested by Hjelmslev and made popular by Barthes:



(There is a phenomenon of connotation when a sign-function (*Expression* plus *Content*) becomes in its turn the expression of a further content.)

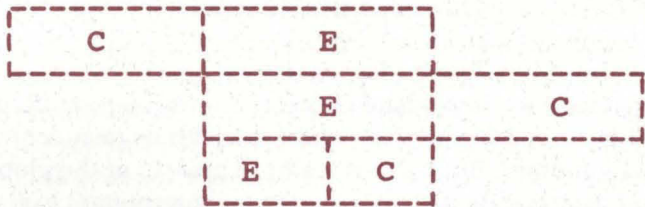
However, in order to have connotation, that is a second meaning of a sign, the whole underlying first sign is required, expression plus content. *Pig* connotes "filthy person" because the first literal meaning of this word presupposes such semantic markers as "unclean animal." The first sense of the word has to be kept in mind (or at least socially recorded by a dictionary) in order to make the second sense acceptable. If the meaning of *pig* were "gentle horse-like white animal with a horn in its front," the word could not connote "filthy person."

A can connote B because of a strongly established metonymic relationship (for instance: cause for effect) or: because semantic markers characterize both contents of two sign functions (and in this sense metaphors are a subspecies of connotation), but not because of a mere phonetic similarity between expressions.

Usually, and especially when a connotation becomes culturally recorded, the connotative link is legitimated by the context. In a Walt Disney context the three little pigs are neither filthy nor unpleasant. But in cases of neoplastic growth, as happens in the most extreme cases of hermetic drift, no contextual

structure holds any longer, and the interpreter is entitled to shift from association to association, and in doing so every connection becomes acceptable.

The following diagram aims at suggesting an idea of neoplastic connotative growth



where at a certain point a mere phonetic association (expression to expression) opens a new pseudo-connotative chain where the content of the new sign is no longer depending on the content of the first one.

Thus one faces a drift-phenomenon which is analogous to what happens in a chain of family resemblances. Consider a series of things A, B, C, D, E, analyzable in terms of component properties a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h so that every thing can possess some of the properties of the other, but not all of them. It is clear that, even with a short series, we can find a parenthood between two things that have nothing in common, provided they belong to a universal chain of uninterrupted relationships of similarity:

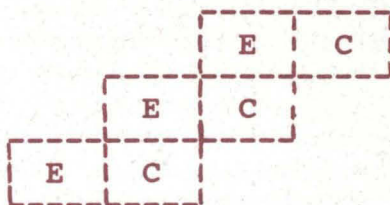


At the end no common property will unite A with E, but one: They belong to the same network of family resemblances. Only this way one can know, according to the Paracelsian dictum, one thing within the other. But in such a chain, at the moment we know E, any notion about A has vanished. Connotations proliferate like a cancer and at every step pleasure of the drift is given by the shifting from sign to sign and there is no purpose outside the enjoyment of the travel through the labyrinth of signs or things.

Provided one is able to go on playing such a game ad infinitum, one can shift from element to element of the universal furniture, but every element is cognitively characterized and determined only in so far as it sends back to something else.



If we had to represent the ideal process of unlimited semiosis by a diagram similar to the one used for connotation, we should probably outline something like



where every content (or Immediate Object) of an expression (Representamen) is interpreted by another expression endowed with its own content, and so on potentially ad infinitum. But there is a sort of growth of the global content, an addition of determinations, since every new interpretant explains on a different ground the object of the previous one and at the end one knows more about the origin of the chain as well as about the chain itself. D. Pierce

## Unlimited Semiosis and Deconstruction

If unlimited semiosis has nothing to do with hermetic drift, it has, however, been frequently quoted in order to characterize another form of drift, namely that extolled by deconstruction.

According to Jacques Derrida, a written text is a machine that produces an indefinite deferral. Being by nature of a "testamentary essence" a text enjoys, or suffers from, the absence of the subject of writing and of the designated thing or the referent.<sup>3</sup> Any sign is "readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift."<sup>4</sup>

To affirm that a sign enjoys, or suffers from, the absence of its author and of its referent does not necessarily mean that this sign has no objective or literal linguistic meaning. But Derrida wants to instaurate a practice (which is philosophical more than practical) for challenging those texts that appear dominated by the idea of a definite, final, and authorized meaning. He wants to challenge, more than the sense of a text, the metaphysics of presence born from an interpretation based on the idea of a final meaning. He wants to show the power of language and its ability to say more than it literally pretends to say.

<sup>3</sup> *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> "Signature, Event, Context," *Glyph 1*, 1977, p. 182.

Once the text has been deprived of a subjective intention behind it, its readers have no longer the duty, or the possibility, to remain faithful to such an absent intention. It is thus possible to conclude that language is caught in a play of multiple signifying games, that a text cannot incorporate any absolute univocal meaning, that there is no transcendental signified, that the signifier is never co-present with a signified which is continually deferred and delayed; and that every signifier is related to another signifier so that there is nothing outside the significant chain which goes on ad infinitum.

I have used on purpose the expression 'ad infinitum' because it reminds us of a similar expression used by Peirce to define the process of unlimited semiosis. Can we say that the infinite drift of deconstruction is a form of unlimited semiosis in Peirce's senses? Such a suspicion can be encouraged by the fact that Richard Rorty,<sup>5</sup> dealing with deconstruction and other forms of so-called 'textualism,' has labeled them instances of 'pragmatism.'

He thinks that in the present century "there are people who write as if there were nothing but texts... The intuitive realist thinks that there is such a thing as Philosophical Truth because he thinks that, deep down beneath all the texts, there is something which is not just one more text but that to which various texts are trying to be 'adequate.' The pragmatist does not think that there is anything like that" (p. xxxvii). Moreover he thinks that the strongest form of pragmatism is instantiated by those authors who consider every reading as a misreading and who simply beat the text into a shape which will serve their own purposes.

The pragmatism of which Rorty speaks is not the pragmatism of Peirce. Rorty knows that Peirce only invented the word 'pragmatism' but remained "the most Kantian of thinkers" (p.161). But even though Rorty prudently puts Peirce at the margins of such kind of pragmatism, he puts deconstruction and Derrida within its boundaries. And it is exactly Derrida who summons Peirce.

### **Derrida on Peirce**

In the second chapter of his *Grammatology* Derrida looks for authorities able to legitimize his attempt to outline a semiosis of infinite play, of the infinite whirl of interpretation. Among the authors he quotes after Saussure and Jakobson, there is also Peirce. Derrida finds out a series of fascinating quotations according to which, for Peirce, *symbols* (here taken as equivalent to saussurean signs) *grow*.

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<sup>5</sup> *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982.



"Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from icons, or from mixed signs." But these roots must not compromise the structural originality of the field of symbols, the autonomy of a domain, a production, and a play: "So it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow. *Omne symbolum de symbolo.*"<sup>6</sup>

In another quotation Derrida finds that the third branch of semiotics, pure rhetoric "has the task to ascertain the laws by which in every scientific intelligence one sign gives birth to another." (p.49)

Thus Derrida can conclude that:

"Peirce goes very far in the direction that I have called the deconstruction of the transcendental signified, which, at one time or another, would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. I have identified logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence as the exigent, powerful, systematic, and irrepressible desire for such a signified. Now Peirce considers the indefiniteness of reference as the criterion that allows us to recognize that we are indeed dealing with a system of signs. *What broaches the movement of signification is what makes its interruption impossible. The thing itself is a sign.* An unacceptable proposition for Husserl, whose phenomenology remains therefore - in its "principle of principles" - the most radical and most critical restoration of the metaphysics of presence. The difference between Husserl's and Peirce's phenomenologies is fundamental since it concerns the concept of the sign and of the manifestation of presence, the relationship between the re-presentation and the originary presentation of the thing itself (truth).... The so-called "thing itself" is already a *representamen* shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The *representamen* functions only by giving rise to an *interpretant* that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move. The property of the *representamen* is to be itself and another, to be produced as a structure of reference, to be separated from itself. The property of the *representamen* is not to be *proper (propre)*, that is to say absolutely proximate to itself (*prope, propius*). The *represented* is always already a *representamen*....

From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs.*" (pp. 49-50).

Thus it seems that the whole Peircean theory of unlimited semiosis supports the position of Derrida by which "if reading must not be content with doubling the text, it cannot legitimately transgress the text toward

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<sup>6</sup> Of *Grammatology*, pp.48, 326 (footnote with reference to Charles Peirce, *Elements of Logic*, 2.202).

something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified object outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place, outside language... There is nothing outside the text (il n'y a pas de hors-texte)." (p. 158)

Is this interpretation of Peirce philologically, and philosophically, correct? I understand how ironical my question can sound. If Derrida assumed that his interpretation is the good one he should also assume that Peirce's text had a *privileged meaning* to be isolated, recognized as such and spelled out unambiguously. Derrida would be the first to say that his reading makes Peirce's text move forward, beyond the alleged intentions of his author. But if we are not entitled, from the derridian point of view, to ask if Derrida read Peirce well, we are fully entitled to ask, from the point of view of Peirce, if he would have been satisfied with Derrida's interpretation.

Certainly Peirce supports the idea of unlimited semiosis: a sign is "anything<sup>\*</sup> which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, this interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on ad infinitum... If the series of successive interpretants comes to an end, the sign is thereby rendered imperfect, at least." (2.300)

Peirce could not do differently, since he was assuming (as he did in "Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man") that: (1) we have no power of introspection and all knowledge of the internal world is derived by hypothetical reasoning, (2) we have no power of intuition and every cognition is determined by previous cognitions, (3) we have no power of thinking without signs and (4) we have no conception of the absolutely recognizable. But in spite of this, deconstructive drift and unlimited semiosis cannot be equivalent concepts.

I do not agree with Searle when he says that "Derrida has a distressing penchant for saying things that are obviously false" (*Glyph*, 1977, p. 203). To the contrary, Derrida has a fascinating penchant for saying things that are non-obviously true, or true in a non-obvious way. When he says that the concept of communication cannot be reduced to the idea of transport of a unified meaning, that the notion of literal meaning is problematic, that the current concept of context risks to be inadequate, when he stresses, in a text, the absence of the sender, of the addressee and of the referent and explores all the possibilities of a non-univocal interpretability of it; when he reminds us that every sign can be *cited* and in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable - in these and in many other cases he says things that no semiotician can disregard. But frequently Derrida - in order to stress non-



obvious truths - overlooks very obvious truths that nobody can reasonably pass over in silence. Rorty would say that Derrida "has no interest in bringing 'his philosophy' into accord with common sense" (1982, p. 87).

I think rather that Derrida takes many of these obvious truths for granted - while frequently some of his followers do not.

Derrida would be - and indeed he was - the first to deny that we can always use language as an instance of drift and the first to reject the claim that there are no criteria for verifying the reasonableness of a textual interpretation. In *Grammatology* he reminds his readers that "without...all the instruments of traditional criticism... critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guard-rail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading" (p. 158 of the English tr.).

Let us for a while protect the reading of Peirce, instead of opening it too much.

## Peirce Alone

It is true that Peirce speaks of a possible infinite interpretation. This is possible because reality appears to us under the form of a continuum where there are no absolute individuals, and this is the principle of Synechism: "A true continuum is something whose possibilities of determination no multitude of individuals can exhaust" (1934: 6.170). Reality is a continuum which swims in indeterminacy (1. 171-72) and just because of this the principle of continuity is "fallibilism objectified" (1.171). In a continuum where one can isolate infinite undetermined individuals, the possibility of error is always present, and therefore semiosis is potentially unlimited.

This indeterminacy of our knowledge involves vagueness: "A subject is determinate in respect to any character which inheres in it or is (universally and affirmatively) predicted of it... In all other respects it is indeterminate" (5. 447). In this sense Peirce is affirming a principle of contextuality: something can be truly asserted within a given universe of discourse and under a given description, but this assertion does not exhaust all the other, and potentially infinite, determinations of that object. Every judgement is conjectural in nature and common sense, even when true, is always vague" (5. 181, 7.646-7).

But there are other ideas in Peirce that seem to undermine Derrida's reading. If the theory of unlimited semiosis can appear, in Rorty's terms, as an instance of textualism, that is to say, of idealism, we cannot disregard the realistic overtones of Peirce's idealism.

In spite of fallibilism, synechism, vagueness, for Peirce "the idea of meaning is such as to involve some reference to a purpose" (5. 166). The idea of a purpose, pretty natural for a pragmaticist, is pretty embarrassing for a 'pragmatist' (in Rorty's terms). A purpose is, without any shadow of a doubt, and at least in the Peircean framework, connected with something which lies outside language. Maybe it has nothing to do with a transcendental subject but it has to do with referents, with the external world, and links the idea of interpretation to the idea of interpreting according to a given meaning. When Peirce provides his famous definition of lithium as a packet of instructions aimed at permitting not only the identification but also the production of a specimen of lithium, he remarks: "The peculiarity of this definition is that it tells you what you are to *do* in order to gain a perceptive acquaintance with the object of the word" (2. 330).

Semiosis is unlimited and, through the series of interpretants, explains itself by itself, but there are at least two cases in which semiosis is confronted with something external to it.

The first case is the one of indices. I am eager to challenge Peirce's idea that indices, in order to be understood as signs, must be connected to the object they designate.<sup>7</sup> But it is irrefutable that in the act of indication (when one says *this* and points his fingers toward a given object of the world), indices are in some way linked to an item of the extralinguistic or extrasemiotic world.

The second one is due to the fact that every semiotic act is determined by a Dynamical Object which "is the Reality which by some means contrives to determine the Sign to its Representation" (4. 536). We produce representamens because we are compelled by something external to the circle of semiosis. The Dynamical Object cannot be a piece of the furniture of the physical world but it can be a thought, an emotion, a motion, a feeling, a belief. We can say that a text can be interpreted independently of the intention of its utterer, but we cannot deny that any text is uttered by somebody according to his/her actual intention, and this original intention was motivated by a Dynamical Object (or was itself the Dynamical Object).

It is true that for Peirce the Dynamical Object can never be attained in its actual identity but is known only through the Immediate Object, and it is as an Immediate Object that the representamen offers it to further interpretations. Peirce semiotics could even be compatible with the radical

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<sup>7</sup> I think that it is possible to define the meaning of an indexical sign without making recourse to its actual referent, cf Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976, 2.11.5.



Berkleyan hypothesis: the alleged Dynamical Object can even be a mere figment produced by God and projected by Him upon our mind. If perception is - as it is for Peirce - semiosis, then even at the original moment of our perceptive acquaintance with the external world, the external world becomes understandable to us only under the form of an Immediate Object. For Peirce, when the sign is produced the Dynamical Object is no longer *there* (and before the sign was produced it was not an object at all). What is present to our mind and to the semiotic discourse is only the Immediate Object to be interpreted by other signs. But the presence of the Representamen as well as the presence (in Mind or elsewhere) of the Immediate Object means that in some way the Dynamical Object, which is not there, *was* somewhere. Being not present, or not-being-there, the Object of an act of interpretation *has been*.

Moreover, that Dynamical Object that *was*, and which is absent in the ghost of the Immediate One, to be translated into the potentially infinite chain of its interpretants, *will be* or *ought to be*. The quasi-heideggerian sound of this statement should not mislead us: I am simply repeating with Peirce that "an endless series of representations, each representing the one behind it, [and until this point Derrida could not but agree with this formula] may be conceived to have an absolute object as its limit." (1.339). Here appears something that cannot find a place within the deconstructive framework: outside the immediate interpretant, the emotional, the energetic and logical one - all internal to the course of semiosis - there is the final logical interpretant, that is, the Habit.

The Habit is a disposition to act upon the world and this possibility to act, as well as the recognition of this possibility as a Law, requires something which is very close to a transcendental instance: a community as an intersubjective guarantee of a non-intuitive, non-naively realistic, but rather conjectural notion of truth. Otherwise we could not understand why, given an infinite series of representations, the interpretant is "another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along" (1.339).

There is a real perfection of knowledge by which "reality is constituted" (5.356). If for the pragmatic maxim (5.462) the meaning of any proposition is nothing more than the conceivable practical effects which the assertion would imply if the proposition were true, then the process of interpretation must stop - at least for some time - out of language, at least in the sense in which not every practical effect must then be spelled out by and through language, and the very agreement among the members of the community cannot but take the form of a new chain of signs: nevertheless the agreement concerns something - be it a practical effect or the possibility of a practical effect - that is produced outside semiosis.

There is something for Peirce that transcends the individual intention of the interpreter, and it is the transcendental idea of a community, or the idea of a community as a transcendental principle. This principle is not transcendental in the Kantian sense, because it does not come before but *after* the semiotic process; it is not the structure of the human mind that produces the interpretation but the reality that the semiosis builds up. Anyway, from the moment in which the community is pulled to agree with a given interpretation, there is, if not an objective, at least an *intersubjective* meaning which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community. Peirce makes clear that the community of researchers is independent of what we think (5.405). The result of the universal inquiry points towards a common core of ideas (5.407). There is an activity of communitarian thought that works as the Destiny (5.408). There is a true conclusion of semiosis and it is Reality (5.384). "The fact that diverse thinkers agree in a common result is not to be taken simply as a brute fact" (Smith 1983: 39). There is an ideal perfection of knowledge (5.356).

The thought or opinion that defines reality must therefore belong to a community of knowers, and this community must be structured and disciplined in accordance with supra-individual principles.

"The real, then, is what, sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in, and which is therefore independent of the vagaries of me and you... The very origin of the conception of reality shows that this conception essentially involves the notion of a community" (5.311).<sup>8</sup>

There is community because there is no intuition in the Cartesian sense. The transcendental meaning is not there and cannot be grasped by an eidetic intuition: Derrida was true in saying that the phenomenology of Peirce does not - like Husserl's one - reveal a presence. But if the sign does not reveal the thing itself, the process of semiosis produces in the long run a socially shared notion of the thing that the community is engaged to take as if it were in itself true. The transcendental meaning is not at the origins of the process but it must be postulated as a possible and transitory end of every process.

It could be objected that I have insisted too much on the differences between Peirce's positions and various forms of drift. But I did it because in many recent studies I have remarked a general tendency to take unlimited semiosis in the sense of a free reading in which the will of the interpreters, to

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<sup>8</sup> John E. Smith, "Community and Reality," in Eugene Freeman, ed., *The Relevance of Charles Peirce*, La Salle, The Monist Library of Philosophy, 1983, p.39.



use Rorty's metaphor, beats the texts into a shape which will serve their own purposes.

My own purpose in beating (respectfully) Peirce was simply to stress that things are not that simple. And since I have elsewhere stated that, if it is very difficult to decide if a given interpretation is a good one, it is, however, always possible to decide if it is a bad one, in the course of my speech my purpose was not so much to say what unlimited semiosis is, but at least what it is not and cannot be.









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